

3-23-1989

Interview with My Vang and Ye Chak (FA 83)

Manuscripts & Folklife Archives

Western Kentucky University, mssfa@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist



Part of the [Folklore Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, "Interview with My Vang and Ye Chak (FA 83)" (1989). *FA Oral Histories*. Paper 378.
https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/378

This Transcription is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in FA Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

1-1

TRANSCRIPTION

Name of Oral History Project Southeast Asian Refugee Project

Tape 1 of 1. The number of the tape being transcribed 3.

Name of Narrators My Vang and Ye Chak

Address 438 Larman Mill Road

Bowling Green, KY 42104 Tel. 782-3948

Name of principal interviewer Carol A. Bell

Date of interview March 23, 1989 Place of interview Vang home

Other persons present at interview Chear Mounn, Suzanne Bell

Equipment used: Reel-to-reel__ ; Cassette x ; Model Realistic

Tape used: Brand Ampex; Amount (side 1) all; (side 2) all

Summary description of interview context and contents:

My Vang and his wife Ye Chak are Cambodian refugees who have been in the U.S. nearly 10 years. They were interviewed at the Vang home at 4 p.m. when both get home from work and their daughter Mary Ann gets home from kindergarten. Chear Mounn asked to join the interview. During the course of the interview a great many extended family members arrived and many family noises can be heard in the background. My daughter Suzanne Bell arrived to provide my transportation home and asked a few questions too.

C. Bell Thursday, March 23, 1989. This is Carol Bell, at home in Bowling Green, Kentucky, getting ready to go and interview Ye Chak, My Vang, and their family.

Okay. Here we go. Here I am at My Vang's house, and this is March 23, 1989, and I'm going to ask some questions about Cambodia and about schools here in this country. First of all, will you give your full name and how you want me to spell it.

My Vang My Vang. And the first name, which is M-Y, and last name is V-A-N-G is Vang.

C. Bell All right. Does anybody else want to say something, want to be interviewed? You can tell your name too. How about you, Ye?

Ye Chak My name is Ye Chak. First name is Ye, Y-E, last name C-H-A-K.

C. Bell All right, how about you?

Chear Chear. First name C-H-E-A-R, last name M-O-U-N-N.

C. Bell Chear Mounn. Okay. Will you tell your date and place of birth--where you were born.

My Vang Mine is March 7, 1959.

C. Bell In Cambodia?

My Vang Yes, in Cambodia.

C. Bell All right. Ye?

Ye Chak I born in Cambodia October the 5, 1961.

Chear I was born in Cambodia October 19, 1965.

C. Bell How many people live in your family here?

My Vang Four. Four of us.

C. Bell You and Ye?

My Vang Me and my wife and our daughter, and brother-in-law John.

C. Bell All right. Is Mary Ann her Cambodian name?

My Vang No, it's American name, doesn't have no Cambodian name.

C. Bell Oh, she doesn't. Okay. What did your parents do to make a living for your family when you were in Cambodia?

My Vang Well, they worked very hard on the farm, you know, with plowing by water buffaloes and stuff like that.

Chear Making the rice--

My Vang Making the rice, corn, whatever that they like to do like that. But it's hard job.

C. Bell Right. Farming.

My Vang Yes, farming.

C. Bell Who all lived with your family in Cambodia?

My Vang Over there is not like here, because each family, they have to live together, which is like my family have six kids, and when they get married they stay within _____, until they find a place, or building a tent or whatever they can, but not too far away still. Very close to each other.

C. Bell Okay. Then I'll go on and ask about your home. Can you describe your home, your house.

My Vang In Cambodia?

C. Bell Right.

My Vang It's very poor house, you know. It's a little bit big, but we live--well, I don't know how to explain, but on the roof is just like wheat that we cover up.

C. Bell Ah, a thatched roof.

My Vang Yeah, something like that. You know, you've seen in the--

C. Bell Yes, I've seen pictures--

My Vang Yeah, pictures of that, and it's tall and not low to the ground like, very tall, so [points]

Chear About ten feet.

My Vang Yeah, about ten feet.

C. Bell Oh, okay. What was your home made of?

My Vang Wood, wood.

C. Bell How many rooms did it have?

My Vang It don't have no rooms. Sometimes they do have rooms, if they make, you know, if they build a bigger house like this. Everybody just sleep, and--

Chear They make a room, like a bedroom, some house.

C. Bell Ye, was your house like My's?

Ye Chak No, my house different.

C. Bell What was your house like?

Ye Chak Well, they build the same, but they have room, each room, like my Mom room, my brother room, my room, and they have kitchen, living room, just like here. But we don't have bathroom like, we always go to take shower outside, use bathroom outside, it's not like in United States, you know, we don't have electricity in the house.

Chear It's hot there.

My Vang Hot in like a room, like a room, it's hot.

Chear Hot in the country, I mean city.

My Vang No, no, not--two

Chear Ten miles from the--

C. Bell Out of the city?

Chear Out of the city.

C. Bell Was your family--farmers, too?

Chear Yeah.

C. Bell How about yours, Ye?

Ye Chak Yes.

C. Bell They were farmers; how big was your house? You said ten feet off the ground, but in front, was it as big as this room here?

My Vang No, it was bigger than this house, a lot bigger. A lot bigger, but very cool, nice condition to live, I mean. You have a big house, with, you know, good wheats on top--

Chear Careful, fire, burn fast--

C. Bell It would burn fast?

Chear & My [Cambodian-English conversation about what houses were made of and how they could burn]

My Vang Just wood. Wood and wheat.

C. Bell What was in your house? What kind of furniture?

My Vang No furniture. Just the pillows, and [points to grass mat hanging on wall] what's those?

C. Bell Mats?

My Vang Mats, yes. That's what that, Mom made, Mom always made, made your own mats, by the wheat also. Yeah. That's what we always slept on.

C. Bell What about you, Ye?

Ye Chak Same.

C. Bell You had all those rooms, but you didn't have furniture like now?

Ye Chak Not furniture, no.

Chear They made of wood, you know, but not look too good.

Ye Chak Not wall-to-wall.

C. Bell Who did the work in the house?

My Vang Usually Mom and Dad always the step, in front of, you know, the main household, everything. No matter if the kids born, twenty-five years old, have the wife and kids already, still respect father and still follow the father and the mother.

C. Bell Then they would tell you what work to do?

My Vang Well, he, he's always back you up, and be able to watch. He's always _____ because there's no other way to make a living, money, except for him to show, to explain all those stuff the way he's all families.

C. Bell All right. Who did the cooking?

My Vang Mom. Mom did the cooking, Dad did all the food, and the kid put out in the field or the jungle, find some food, stuff like that, just like, you know old days here.

C. Bell Well, I'm going to ask, what kind of clothes did you wear? I can see what Ye has on, but you can't see that on the tape recorder, so--

My Vang Right. [to Ye] Tell what you wear. You can describe.

C. Bell Can you describe what kind of clothes you wore?

Ye Chak Yes, we wear long skirt, like right now, with some shirt in the United State. We buy shirt.

C. Bell Did you buy your clothes, or make them?

Ye Chak We buy some, and we make some. You know we make for the man, the clothes. Just like skirt but different, different color.

My Vang You should see what the people making the clothes out there. I mean first they have to make a whole sheet, and then they cut out for the clothes. It's a hard job. Very, very hard. It takes years and years to get those things done, like one piece, be ready to chop up and do whatever they like to do.

C. Bell Why? Why, are they embroidered, or what takes so long to make them?

My Vang It's very hard, you have to see them, you know. I wish you could go out there and see things and learn.

C. Bell I wish too I could.

S. Bell Do they make the cloth themselves, first?

My Vang Yeah. It took a little worm, like worm that eats the trees, like little green worms and stuff like that.

Ye Chak Eats the leaves.

C. Bell Silkworm?

My Vang Yeah. And they grow those, and stuff like that.

C. Bell I see why it takes so long.

My Vang Yeah. It takes long time to, then they have to dry them all, put in the sun, make sure they, you know, everything's okay. It's hard work for Mom, very hard work for Mom. Not easy. Here you go into Greenwood Mall, say "Here, man, I want this," "Yeah, I got it."

C. Bell Did the children wear different clothes from the adults, the grownups?

My Vang Yes.

Chear When they go to school, yes. They wore uniform. Like skirt and--

My Vang
Chear No, like white shirt and--Blue pants or sweatshirt Blue, yes--Blue skirt.

Chear Just like Chinese, Thailanders when they go to school. They use the same.

My Vang From one years old to five or six years old, left just totally naked; I mean no clothes to wear yet.

C. Bell Was it that warm?

My Vang It's very hot back there, very hot, the weather was. That's why--

C. Bell So they didn't catch cold?

My Vang That's why we have the tan all over. You know, no matter what, 80 below zero here, we still got the tan.

C. Bell Okay. You're lucky that way.

My Vang Yeah.

C. Bell What about the food you had there? How is that different from what you eat here?

Ye Chak Well, like in Cambodia?

C. Bell Yes.

Ye Chak Well, we always eat rice. And we haven't go to grocery shopping out there. We grow our own vegetables.

Chear All the same what we eat right now. Used to food better.

C. Bell Can you get food you like here, like in Cambodia?

Ye Chak Mostly we eat a lot of fish--

My Vang And we eat pretty much the same we eat here, just a little bit better quality here, a little better quality.

S. Bell Ye, your family raised pigs, didn't they?

Ye Chak Yeah. They had pigs, chicken, all kind of animals.

C. Bell Did you eat them?

Ye Chak Yeah, well, we eat pig and, not really often. But we go out there, we eat wild animals out there.

C. Bell What kind of wild animals?

My Vang Oh, same thing here. Squirrels, rabbits--

C. Bell Oh, game. What we call game.

Ye Chak Yes, what father gets, whatever he gets to--

C. Bell My mother makes a good squirrel pie.

My Vang Squirrel pies?

C. Bell Yes.

My Vang Learn something every day!

C. Bell Did you, little children; did you have baby food
for them? Did you feed babies breast milk, or out
of bottles?

Ye Chak Breast milk, always. No cow milk.

My Vang Breast milk.

C. Bell No cow milk. Do you use cow milk at all?

My Vang No. We never, no--

C. Bell No.

Chear Some people, they live in the city, they feed them
with milk.

My Vang We can't afford a cow.

Ye Chak See, we were farmers. We live out of city.

Chear Too expensive, cows.

My Vang Cost about ten cents a year, my Dad working, ten
cents a year, more money than he makes.

C. Bell No cash, just your own food?

My Vang Yes, just a little cash.

C. Bell Now, about schools in Cambodia. At what age did
the children start to school? Five?

Chear No, they start different from American year. See,
they start from twelve, that's first grade. Twelve
through one. Twelve, eleven,--

C. Bell Oh.

Chear See, Americans go at one, you know; second, I mean
first, second, third.

C. Bell But you start at twelve and work up to one.

Chear Yes.

Ye Chak Her question is, how old are children?

My Vang Five, seven--
Chear Yeah, the first, same age, but they start first
 twelve grade, I mean--

C. Bell How long did they go to school every day?
 Did they go every day?

My Vang Same thing, eight to three, eight, yeah, eight to
 three.

Chear Yeah, same thing as here, America. Eight to three

Ye Chak [Whispers something about "just one answer the
 questions"]

C. Bell That's all right. I like to hear; I like to hear
 everything they have to say. That's fine; that's
 fine. Well, did you go home for lunch?

My Vang At school?

C. Bell Yes.

My Vang No.

C. Bell Did you take lunch, or did they serve, cook lunch
 there?

My Vang No. No served lunch, no cooked lunch, just eat in
 the morning--

Ye Chak Eat at home.

My Vang Come back, when you're through with school at
 three. Come back and eat.

S. Bell Yeah, the Americans should eat at home.

C. Bell What about meals? Did you just have two meals a
 day then, or did you eat more?

Ye Chak Twice a day we fried.

C. Bell In the morning?

Ye Chak In the morning, and at night.
 No coffee, no cooky, nothing at school.

C. Bell No snacks?

Ye Chak No snacks, huh-uh.

My Vang No snacks either.

C. Bell Can you describe what school was like?

My Vang Well, school was a lot, you know, the teacher was a lot meaner than here. Because if you make mistake, they always beat, beat you. You talk about the parent, I mean worse than the parent race.

Chear That's allowed.

My Vang That's allowed. The teacher out there, they can do anything to the kid if they don't listen to them.

C. Bell Did you ever get beaten in school?

My Vang Oh yes. Lots of times. You know what they do, let your fingers like this, [makes all five fingers into bunch with tips clustered at one level] then a bamboo stick, you know, WHAM!

Ye Chak Sometimes on the hand.

My Vang It hurt. Or sometimes then you hit the table, you know, like this, slam it real hard, up a little bit, do it again, until you know--

Chear They do it until you pay attention to it. If you late, they scare them so--

My Vang If you late, you missing one day, you know you got, you going to get a whip.

Ye Chak When you late, what you do, make you run how many--

My Vang Oh. When you late, they make you run around the school building, about ten rounds, you know, about _____, run and run around until your tongue's coming out.

Chear I run a lot of times around there. I did it for four years. High school, anyway.

My Vang Very, very hard, education out there, but--

C. Bell Did you do that running?

My Vang No, no. I got whipped some, though. I got whipped some.

 [Water is served to all of us.]

S. Bell Have to keep his whistle wet.

My Vang Yeah, my throat get dry. [conversation about drinks]

C. Bell What subjects did you have in school?

My Vang When I went in the first grade, we study A-B-C,
and--

Chear Just about same as here.

My Vang Like that. A-B-C. Then next year, well, they had
a book, like Book one, Book two, Book three, too,
but it's all their language, and it's different,
because--

C. Bell Whose language? French?

My Vang No, it's Cambodian language. But we had so much
alphabets, you know we had like 56 alphabets, Cam-
bodian has, so that's why we had to start--

C. Bell Oh yeah, more than twice as many.

My Vang Yeah, 56.

Chear American only 26.

C. Bell Right. That's right. Suzanne, you know that 2
times 26 is--

S. Bell [laughter] 56.

C. Bell 52, okay?

My Vang You had to study that over and over again, then
they go by the books, A then B, what the sounds
like, someone does that, over and over again. And
then, when you up to second grade, then you start
on math a little bit, on math. Just same way like
here, but just different techniques, new technology
up there, the people.

C. Bell When you learned to read, did you learn to write
Cambodian too?

My Vang Yeah, yeah. See, when you learn to read, when you
learn how to read, you learn how to write, over
there.

C. Bell Yes, we do that too. What subjects, when you got,
did you have high school?

My Vang Yes, they do have.

C. Bell Was school divided, I mean, like it is here, into
different schools?

My Vang No, no, no, no. They're not divided. I don't
know, maybe some city does, but for my city they
don't have divided, they're just all in one group,
but it's separate buildings.

C. Bell Was it all in one room?

Chear What is?

C. Bell Your schoolrooms.

My Vang No.

C. Bell Did you all go to the same room, or did you move from one room to the other?

Chear You study math for an hour, then go like to where is English, something like that, you know--

My Vang Now, that is only when you get on to high school.

Chear Yeah, I talk about when you get into high school.

C. Bell All right, let's talk about high school.

My Vang Yeah, for high school you have to sit there in one room, one room daily, day, day, day--

Chear They didn't change anything.

My Vang Except they change the subject to study.

S. Bell Did you have to bring anything with you, like pencils, or papers, or did they have a chalkboard, or--

My Vang Yeah, they had a big chalkboard, and-- Yes, you had to have your own, you know, you had to have your own chalkboards also, when you would start.

C. Bell Oh, what we call slates.

My Vang Yes, carry with you all the time. And the notebooks also.

Chear That's the first, second grades. That's when we carry--

My Vang Carry all that.

Chear When we get to ninth grade, we don't carry that. All papers.

C. Bell All papers then.

Chear Yeah, just like high school, I mean junior high.

C. Bell What subjects did you have, Chear, in high school?

Chear What subjects. When I was in ninth grade, we were in the, let me see, junior high school, can be ninth grade?

My Vang It is.

C. Bell Yes.

Chear So I had, well, like American, I take about two months of French.

My Vang That's when the Commies come.

C. Bell That's more than I had. I never had--

Chear Then the Commies come in.

My Vang Yeah. It's all over like then.

Chear Yeah, we're going into ninth grade, about three months, then the Commies come in.

My Vang The Commies came, yeah.

S. Bell Well, what happened when they came?

My Vang No school.

Chear No school then, no school then. They just thought working was it, making you work.

C. Bell Everyone had to work?

Chear Yeah. Had to do what they told us.

C. Bell Was your school all boys, or was it boys and girls?

My Vang Mixed. Same thing here.

C. Bell Ye, did you go to the same school as My?

Ye Chak No. Different school. Different.

Chear This is the exact same that you are there in Cambodia. Made them wear quite a few clothes, you know. Not like American. You can wear short, you know. Your clothes had to be nice, like.

C. Bell Uniforms.

Chear Yeah. You got to be clean, too.

My Vang You could sit anywhere you wanted to sit, but, the clothes like white--

Chear You had to be organized. White out there. Americans nice too, but they can wear, wear--

C. Bell Anything?

Chear Anything.

C. Bell Yes, that's probably true. Did you, are you religious? Do you have a religion, like Buddhism?

My Vang Yeah, I was, very you know, believe in Buddhist, but I still am today, but it's just so many things.

C. Bell But there's no temple here--

My Vang Yes, but we still believe, we are still believing. But we do believe in God; and we do believe in everything around here too, we just, whatever comes up, then we go that.

C. Bell Did you have religion like, taught in your school?

My Vang No, I don't think so. Not in school, no.

C. Bell No monks for teachers, or just--

My Vang Yes, those are there for an education; no, you have to became to a monks, and then you can study monk's language, monk's education, but it's more difficult when you're older, when you're like eighteen or nineteen or twenty.

C. Bell You could choose that, then?

My Vang You had to. Each male had to do that.

C. Bell Oh, everyone--

My Vang Each man had to became to a monk. You know, some doesn't have to, but the people in that village do not respect as they, you know, as--

C. Bell If you did not?

My Vang If you did not, yes.

C. Bell They wouldn't respect you.

My Vang Well, they do respect but they don't respect you as you're a little bit high, because, you know what I mean?

C. Bell Yes.

S. Bell So, My Vang, if you would have been eighteen, turned eighteen in Cambodia, would you had to have monk's religion, I mean education?

My Vang Yes. Uh-huh. My father would make me to, would make me to. But I had been in two weeks, being a monk, but--

Ye Chak He'd been a lot smarter. You get smarter, a lot smarter.

My Vang Yes, smarter.

C. Bell Before children go to school, do you, did your family tell stories to children?

My Vang No.

C. Bell Did, never stories to--

Ye Chak No, no stories.

My Vang Stories, story is a different way, I mean. When, when a parent told a story, they didn't told a story about a monkey, I mean about--like here, we read the books about. They told a story, long time ago, about the past and stuff like that, and we just sit there and listen. Some scary, some not, some funny.

C. Bell Uh-huh. Were they about your own family in the past, or--

My Vang
Chear No.
All over.

C. Bell What we call myths, I guess?

My Vang They one story, it's all over the country, that they know, just like, uh,

S. Bell Like, "Everybody knows that story?"

My Vang Yeah. Like when you talk, everybody knows that, too.

Ye Chak They don't have any little bear, little monkey stories.

My Vang They go on and on and on.

C. Bell Do you know a story you could tell us?

Ye Chak About where? Cambodia or here?

S. Bell Like what your Mom used to tell you when you were little.

My Vang Oh, I don't think we can--
Ye Chak We can't do that. We can't make it up.

My Vang Make it up.

C. Bell You can't remember one?

My Vang Not really. It's been a long time. Well, remember
some, but I don't think we can get together for
right now, maybe some other time.

C. Bell Okay.

S. Bell Ye, were there laws that said you had to go to
school. Was it up to your family whether they
wanted to send you?

Ye Chak Yes, was up to--
My Vang Yeah.

S. Bell And your Mom and Dad didn't want to send you?

Ye Chak Well, yes, but my Mom so poor that, had nobody to
help her out. Working the farm, take care of my
sister and my brothers, so I had to, I been to
school, but, couple months, I guess. I didn't
learn nothing.

Chear No, you didn't--

Ye Chak You can say it.

C. Bell What did your parents do if children got sick? Did
you ever get sick, or were you healthy there?

Ye Chak Sick sometime.
My Vang Yes, sick, just like here.

C. Bell What happened?

Ye Chak Most times, they had their own medicine. I don't
know, they just go out in the woods, pick up some-
thing, I don't know what, they know, old people,
they know the medicine, what's good for children.
They had tree bark, and--

My Vang Soak in the water--

Ye Chak Yeah, I don't know, they just bring some kind of
leaves, peel the skin from a tree and put in the
water, make you drink, make you feel better. If
you're dying, you had to see a doctor, just like
here.

C. Bell Oh, then you had doctors. Were they in the city?

My Vang No, no. It's too far away.

C. Bell You had a doctor near where you lived?

My Vang No.

Ye Chak You know it take six hour to get here.

C. Bell You would have had to go to a hospital, then, or did they have a hospital?

My Vang It's take a lot of money.

Ye Chak Where we live we don't have hospital. See, they have the people that know, kind of know everything, like long people, they know all kinds of disease that people have, they have all different kind of medicine, you know.

C. Bell I remember somebody who visited once. Remember when Howard was sick, had that back problem?

Ye Chak Yes. Yes, he came to someone's home.

C. Bell Who was that man?

My Vang We don't know him, he just came, he came here to Bowling Green.

C. Bell Yes, he went to California, I believe.

Chear Sukkum.

S. Bell Sukkum! That--

My Vang That was his name.

C. Bell Sukkum. Yes.

My Vang He may be back some time.

C. Bell Yes, when?

My Vang Not likely.

Ye Chak See, we maybe never see doctor. Maybe once a year, maybe never. It's not like here.

My Vang See, because, you know he, people have the cancer, he think he can do it but if he got the right stuff. And he think, a doctor, a doctor say to treat, "I don't know," that's what he told me, that he can treat. But when that man, I called him, and asked him about Howard, he said he really wanted to come, but he needed the _____, I mean the coconut.

C. Bell What, to treat with?

My Vang Yes, he need the coconut--

Ye Chak Explain.

Chear Wait, just, I'll explain it. The green, you know
the green, fresh coconut picked up from the tree?

My Vang Then he have, he has some of his own medicines in
there, you know, just like--

Chear Like some roots--

My Vang Like the roots, or trees, or teeth, or bones, or
whatever. What those are thousands and thousands
of years that have been kept, people have had it
before then and gave it to him, told him to take
care of it.

C. Bell And he brought it from Cambodia?

My Vang Yeah. Yeah, he'd like to try, because a lot of
people that had those cancers have died, they never
made it, but he said he'd like to try.

C. Bell Did he ever treat a Cambodian? Wait just a second,
I think I'd better turn this off.